

Terminology of language status in Slavic countries

For most of the 20th century Slavic countries were under the political and ideological control of totalitarian regimes. The social sciences whose purpose was to study sociolinguistic phenomena and the terminology they used were likewise under this ideological control. The end of the 20th century saw the decline of this influence and the increase of intercultural and interlingual relations bringing a variety of terminological borrowings of both lexical and conceptual nature, and the meaning of many terms was revised. The adoption of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages by the Council of Europe and the subsequent discussion concerning its interpretation and implementation highlight the problem of the correct and unambiguous interpretation of key terms, especially those denoting language status. Of special importance is the semantic and linguocognitive content of the lexical elements comprising sociolinguistic terms, which enables the terms to be understood not only by linguists and lawyers specializing in language policy, but also by the broader public.

The status terms lack unification both internationally and within individual national terminologies. This often accounts for misunderstandings and conflicting interpretations of sociolinguistic concepts in political or scholarly arguments, especially when discussing language legislation. An example of this is the argument over the meaning of the Ukrainian terms *державна мова* (literally “state language”) and *офіційна мова* (literally “official language”), triggered in 1994 by the announcement of the then Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma of his intention to promote the Russian language to the status of official language in Ukraine while leaving the status of the state language to Ukrainian. The argument was resolved by the Decision of the Constitutional Court of Ukraine of December 14, 1999, saying “The state (official) language is the language to which the state gives the legal status of the compulsory means of communication for officials of

government bodies and local self-government structures, and in other spheres of public life”. The context of this sentence implies that the terms *state language* and *official language* are close synonyms, however, placing the adjective *official* into brackets may be taken as an indirect indicator of the paramount importance of the term *state language*.

It is known that in 1953 UNESCO experts suggested the differentiation of these terms using their English analogues *national language* (in the sense of “state language”) and *official language*¹. Both terms indicate a language that is the instrument of state legislation, public administration, the law enforcement system and that is the principal medium of the educational system, public services and the media. V. Neroznak emphasizes that the state language also performs the function of sociopolitical and cultural integration, which is not necessarily attributed to the official language and from this perspective the state language “plays the role of the symbol of a particular state”².

Frequently the term *state language* is perceived as being of higher status than *official language* in many post-Soviet countries. The initial component – *state* (Ukr. *держава*, Rus. *государство*) maintains semantic and semiotic links with such concepts as “nation-building” (Ukr. *державотворення*, Rus. *государственное строительство*) and “state symbols” (Ukr. *державні символи*, Rus. *государственные символы*).

Since the years of the Ukrainian Revolution (1917-1921) the terms denoting the country’s main language have changed more than once. The first language status term to be mentioned in the official documents of the Ukrainian government (called the General Secretariat in 1917) was *official language* (Ukr. *офіційна мова*)³. At that time the process of nation-building was in its initial stage and Ukraine had not yet proclaimed its state sovereignty. Later historical developments

¹ *Нерознак В. П.* Языковая реформа (1990–1995) // Вестн. Рос. акад. наук. — М., 1996. — Т. 66. № 1. — С. 5.

² *Ibid.*

³ See *Данилевська О. М.* Мова в революції та революція в мові. Мовна політика Центральної Ради, Гетьманату та Директорії. — К., 2009. — С. 58.

saw the emergence of the concurrent expression *офіційно-урядова мова* (literally “officially-governmental language”) and very soon *державна мова* (first used in the law “On the introduction of the Ukrainian language into banking and trade activity” adopted by the Centralna Rada (Ukrainian Parliament) on March 24, 1918). At that time Ukraine had already proclaimed its state sovereignty and the change of language status terms thus correlated with the change of the status of Ukraine as a country.

There is much evidence indicating that language is perceived as a powerful means of both cultural and political integration. Moscow State University President Victor Sadovnichiy in his keynote speech at the conference on humanitarian education in Russia (February 15, 2007) placed emphasis on the special role of language as a factor of not just cultural, but also political integration: “Language is the instrument of the political consolidation of countrymen not only inside the country, but also beyond its official borders ... Even though the Russian language is officially losing its role of state language in a considerable part of the former Soviet Union, it still remains an important means of communication”⁴. Prof. Sadovnichy emphasizes the necessity to retain the role of the Russian language as a factor of cultural integration beyond the official borders of the Russian Federation and the borders of the Russian ethnic area. The publications of Russian scholars and politicians express the view that “gradual disintegration of the common language space (Russ. *распад языкового пространства*) is taking place in the post-Soviet space”⁵ and that granting the Russian language official status in the post-Soviet states is an important factor in safeguarding its position.

Similar views were expressed by one of the top Russian statespersons, the Head of the Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation

⁴ Виктор Садовничий. Гуманитарное образование в России: мысли вслух. Выступление на Всероссийском совещании-конференции «Традиции и инновации в образовании: гуманитарное измерение». 15 февраля 2007 г. Москва, МГУим. М.В. Ломоносова // Безопасность Евразии. – 2007. - № 4 (30). – С. 8

⁵ Пьянов А. Е. Статус русского языка в странах СНГ // Вестн. Кемеров. гос. ун-та. — Кемерово, 2011. — № 3 (47). — С. 57.

Mrs. Valentina Matviyenko, stressing that the major task of all Russian lawmakers at all levels is to “increase efforts of ... moving forward the Russian language across the world, especially moving it forward in the post-Soviet space”⁶.

An important distinctive feature of the state language is the responsibility of the state for the quality of the language, its codification, and elaboration of its expressive means with due respect to its dialects and its literary tradition. This implication derives from the presumption that a state language (in the English-speaking countries it is commonly called national language) is the national property of the respective nation. The difference between the state language as national property and language as the official language is quite explicit in countries having two or more top status languages. For example, in Belarus both Belorussian and Russian have the equal status of state languages⁷. However only the autochthonous language of the country (Belorussian) can qualify as the “national property” of Belorussian people, while the Russian language is the “national property” of Russian people. The sovereignty of Belarus over the language as national property empowers the country’s government and scholarly institutions to set up the norms and standards of the Belorussian language, not Russian. The national linguistic sovereignty also implies the responsibility of Belarus for the maintenance of the Belorussian language as a part of a common European heritage.

Judging by the texts of international expert opinions on the language policy of individual countries, the discussed expressions (*state language* and *official language*) demonstrate the symptoms of differentiation. “The Opinion of the Council of Europe Venice Commission on the Slovak State Language Act” (October 16, 2010) uses the expression *state language* for the Slovak language.

⁶ See Стенограмма заседания Президиума Совета законодателей Российской Федерации при Федеральном Собрании Российской Федерации 6 июля 2012 года. — [⁷ Presumably the term *official language* might be more appropriate in a situation like this with reference to Russian](https://www.google.com.ua/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CC8QFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fszrf.km.duma.gov.ru%2Ffile.xp%3Fidb%3D3185345%26fn%3D%25D1%25F2%25E5%25ED%25EE%25E3%25F0%25E0%25EC%25EC%25E0%2520%25CF%25F0%25E5%25E7%25E8%25E4%25E8%25F3%25EC%25E0%2520%25D1%25C7%2520(06-07-2012).doc%26size%3D251904&ei=j3NHUZXAFKSn4AT7IIHABA&usg=AFQjCNH42-DIVlxkZ79O5fG0hfypIRRvA&sig2=vFOUD5umEzVz2J_5VnOhHw&bvm=bv.43828540,d.Yms).</p>
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This is the literal translation of the Slovak expression *štátny jazyk* used in the country's legislation. However in a more generalized context the Slovak language is also covered by the meaning of the expression *official language*: “The promotion of the State language guarantees the development of the identity of the State community, and further ensures mutual communication among and within the constituent parts of the populations. The possibility for citizens to use the official language throughout the country can be ensured also in order to avoid that they be discriminated against in the enjoyment of their fundamental rights, in areas where the persons belonging to national minorities have a majority position” (point 42). Whereas in the first sentence the term *state language* personalizes the Slovak case, in the second sentence the term *official language* refers to a potential situation of a similar kind that could happen in any country, Slovakia included.

Likewise the two terms are used with differential meanings in the December 20, 2010 Assessment and Recommendations of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities of the Draft Law “On Languages in Ukraine” (No. 1015-3): “57. ... In public administration, the provisions of the Draft Language Law introduce a system in which Russian would enjoy excessive benefits, elevating it de facto to an official language across most of Ukraine's territory and reducing incentives to use the State language”. The term *state language* refers to a particular national code (Ukrainian) while *official language* describes an abstract notion in the analyzed context – a high status to which a language can be elevated by law.

Parallel use of the terms denoting top language status is observed in Polish legislation. The “Law on national and ethnic minorities and regional language” (“Ustawa o mniejszościach narodowych i etnicznych oraz o języku regionalnym”) of January 6, 2005 uses the term *język urzędowy* (“government language”) while the official Polish translation of the Charter uses the expression *oficjalny język* (“official language”). The last expression is broadly used in the publications

referring to the Charter⁸ and in phrases like *oficjalny język Unii Europejskiej* (“the official language of the European Union”). However the expression *urzędowy język Unii Europejskiej* having the same meaning can be concurrently found in the contemporary Polish sociolinguistic writings, usually as a means of avoiding tautology or contextual differentiation: “Obecnie język słoweński, dzięki przystąpieniu Słowenii do Unii Europejskiej, zyskał rangę, nie posiadając wcześniej w historii — *języka oficjalnego*, jako jednego z dwudziestu trzech równoprawnych *języków_urzędowych* Zjednoczonej Europy ...” (Currently, with the accession of Slovenia to the European Union, for the first time in history Slovenian has become an *official language*, as one of the twenty-three equal *government languages* of a United Europe...)⁹. Occasionally both adjectives denoting the language status are used within a single expression – *oficjalny język urzędowy*¹⁰. Such usage is more characteristic of the media than scholarly discourse.

Parallel use of the synonymous expressions *службен јазик* (“official language”) and *официјален јазик* (“official language”) can also be found in Macedonian, showing no visible signs of semantic or functional differentiation.

Slovakia represents a specific case of the application of status terms in its legislation. The language act adopted shortly after the breakup of the Czechoslovakian Socialist Republic (“Zákon o úradnom jazyku v Slovenskej republike”, October 25, 1990) used the term *úradny jazyk* (official language). On November 15, 1995 it was succeeded by the law “On the State language of the Slovak Republic” (Zákon o štátnom jazyku Slovenskej republiky)

⁸ The term *oficjalny język* is also used in “Law on the national and ethnic minorities and on the regional language” (Ustawa o mniejszościach narodowych i etnicznych oraz o języku regionalnym, 06.01.2005).

⁹ *Bońkowski R.* Była Jugosławia wobec Unii Europejskiej — języki, tradycje, kultura (na przykładzie większościowych wspólnot katolickich // *Cyryl i Metody w duchowym dziedzictwie Słowian : Materiały III i IV Konf. Cyrylometodiań. w Białej Podlaskiej (XXIX i XXXIV Konf. Podlaskie) / Red. P. Sotirov. — Biała-Podlaska, 2009. — S. 167.*

¹⁰ *Bońkowski R.* Op. cit. — S. 166; *Sobczak-Pękala B.* Na granicach dwóch kontynentów: Franko-Amerykanie i ich tożsamość // *Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Studia Sociologica IV.* — Kraków, 2012. — Vol. 1. — S. 112; *Migut M.* Iwrit // *Scriptores.* — 2003. — N 2 (28). — S. 76; *Kurier Galicyjski.* — 2011. — 15–28 kwiet. — S. 5.

which gives a brief, but unambiguous definition of the term *state language* (štátny jazyk): “State language has preference over all other languages on the territory of the Slovak Republic” (§ 1, p. 1, 2). There is one more Slovak term denoting top linguistic status, *oficiálny jazyk* (official language), which is used in the official translation of the Charter, ratified by Slovakia in 2001: “...jazyky ... odlišné od oficiálneho(ych) jazyka(ov) daného štátu, nepatria sem dialekty oficiálneho(ych) jazyka(ov) štátu ani jazyky migrantov” (Languages ... other than the official language(s) of the state, not including dialects of the official language(s) of the state or languages of migrants) (article 1). The change of the designation of the country’s major language shows that the terms of language status are perceived by the lawmakers as important instruments of language planning and language policy.

The application of the same language status terms to a number of languages can produce ambiguous contexts and interpretations. For example, the Constitution of Slovenia (article 11) says that Slovene is the official language (*uradni jezik*) and that Italian and Hungarian are also official languages in Slovenia in the areas where the Italian and Hungarian communities live. There is evidence that the application of the term official language (*uradni jezik*) to Slovene (the so-called titular language) is not identical with the sociolinguistic content of the same expression as applied to the Italian and Hungarian minority languages, however there is no formal differentiation of the term’s application in the above quoted constitutional article 11. While the titular language (Slovene) is the official language across the whole country, including the areas where Italian and Hungarian are official languages alongside of Slovene, the official language of a minority is limited to a particular area¹¹.

In many aspects the functions of the Slovene language as determined by the country’s “Law on the public use of Slovene” (“Zakon o javni rabi slovenščine”) are considerably broader than the functions of the other official languages. The

¹¹ See Катунин Д. А. Статус языков в современном законодательстве Словении и словенский язык в законодательных актах сопредельных стран. Статья первая // Язык и культура. — 2008. — № 3. — С. 28, 23–41.

prominent position of the Slovene language is emphasized in the following legislative norm: “The Republic of Slovenia grants the status of the Slovene language through an active language policy (z dejavno jezikovno politiko) that includes provision for the legal basis for its use, the constant scientific monitoring of the living language, the commitment to enhance the possibilities for language use, and the development of the language and its culture” (“Law on the public use of Slovene”, article 4). The state is made responsible for the “support of Slovene language instruction through the adoption of an additional program of development of language knowledge for youth and adults, as well as programs designed for foreigners” (ibid, article 13). All foreign films for preschool children must be dubbed into Slovene, the rest must be either dubbed or captioned (ibid, article 24). These provisions do not apply to other official languages (Italian and Hungarian).

The *official language* in the case of Slovene is a contextual analogy of the expression *state language*. There is evidence of a number of obligations of the state before the language of which the country is the home. A clear indication of the link between language and state in the Slovenian legislation is the requirement of article 25 of the “Law on the public use of Slovene” regulating the use of state funds: “At international public events taking place in the territory of the Republic of Slovenia and funded by public funds, the organiser shall be obliged to ensure the use of Slovene”. Italian and Hungarian, although formally official languages in Slovenia, are nevertheless considered regional or minority languages as regards Slovenia’s obligations according to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages¹².

In the self-proclaimed Republic of Kosovo’s “Act on Language Usage” (“O upotrebi jezika”) the term *official language* refers to Albanian and Serbian: “Albanski i Srpski i njihovi alfabeti su službeni jezici na Kosovu i imaju ravnopravan status u Kosovskim institucijama” (Albanian and Serbian and their

¹² This, however, contradicts article 1 of the Charter defining a regional or minority language as “different from the official language(s) of that State”.

alphabets are official languages in Kosovo and have equal status in Kosovo's institutions) (article 2.1). Alongside of the expression *official language* (“službeni jezik”) the law uses the expression *language of official usage* (“jezik u službenoj upotrebi”), which covers not only Albanian and Serbian (*official languages*), but also the languages that are declared the languages of official usage in their local communities (Romany, Turkish etc). The law applies two synonymic expressions *službeni jezik* and *zvanični jezik* to denote official languages, with no indication of semantic differentiation between these terms.

The Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria (13.07.1991) proclaims Bulgarian the only official language of the country: «Официалният език в републиката е българският» (The official language of the republic is Bulgarian) (article 3). In Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro the expression *language of official usage* is applied. There is abundant evidence that the content of this expression is not identical to that of the *official language*. When Montenegro used to be a part of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia its Constitution said that “in Montenegro the Serbian language of the iekavsky dialect is in official usage” (u službenoj upotrebi je srpski jezik ijekavskog izgovora). After the declaration of independence in 2006, the Constitution of Montenegro was adopted (2007) saying that Montenegrin is the official language (службени језик, službeni jezik) of the country and both Cyrillic and Roman scripts have equal rights (article 13). It also says that Bosnian, Albanian, and Croat languages are used officially (u službeni upotrebi). Similarly, the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia declares Macedonian as the country's official language, while in the areas where the majority of the population is represented by some other nationality, the languages and alphabets of the nationalities are also used officially alongside of the Macedonian language and Cyrillic alphabet (“во службена употреба, покрај македонскиот јазик и кирилското писмо, се и јазикот и писмото на националностите”, article 7).

There is evidence of the meaningful difference of the terms *official language* and *language of official usage* in the Kosovo “Act on language usage” (“O upotrebi jezika”). Along with the official Serbian and Albanian languages and the Turkish, Bosnian and Romany languages that are recognized as official on the level of local self-government, according to article 34, English is also used officially for the period of UNO mandate in Kosovo. The provisions of article 14.4 say that Kosovo’s main law “Constitutional foundations of the provisional self-government” (“Ustavni okvir za privremenu samoupravu”) is published in English, Albanian and Serbian and in the case of discrepancies among these texts the English text has prevailing juridical power (“U slučaju neslaganja, verzija na engleskom jeziku ima jaču pravnu snagu”),¹³ which confirms the importance of the official status of the English language.

Serbia’s Constitution (2006) says that the Serbian language and Cyrillic alphabet are in official usage in the Republic of Serbia (у службеној употреби су српски језик и ћирилично писмо). The “Act on the official usage of language and alphabet” («Закон о службеној употреби језика и писама», 2010) provides that the languages of national minorities are officially used only on the territories of the Republic of Serbia inhabited by the representatives of the national minorities (article 1) alongside with the Serbian language (у службеној употреби су, истовремено са српским језиком и језици и писма националних мањина).

According to the Constitution of the Russian Federation, Russian is the state language of the country. On the level of federal subjects of Russia there are two status terms used for local languages: the *state language of the autonomous republic* and the *local official language*. The last expression (“местный официальный язык”) is used only in the “Act on Languages in the Autonomous Republic of Sakha (Yakutia)” (1992, amended 2002, article 6) with reference to

¹³ See Катунин Д. А. Статус языков в современном сербском законодательстве как реализация языковой политики государства // Вестн. Томс. гос. ун-та. Философия. Социология. Политология. — 2008. — № 2 (3). — С. 149–150.

the non-titular languages of this republic, namely Evenkian, Even, Yukagir, Dolgan and Chukchi languages.

Essential for the differentiation of the concepts “state language” and “official language” is the character and the degree of their connections with the concepts of “duty” and “right”. Judging by the spirit and letter of the language legislation, the use of the adjective *state* (Ukrainian *державний*, Russian *государственный*, Slovak *štátny*, etc.) emphasizes the link of the concept “state language” with the concepts of “duty” along the following lines: 1) the duty of the citizen vis-à-vis the language as a symbol of collective identity, 2) the duty of the state vis-à-vis the language as a symbol of collective identity. The evidence supporting such a presumption is found in the legislation on both national and local levels. For instance the “Act on Languages in the Autonomous Republic of Sakha (Yakutia)” proclaims that native language is an indispensable feature of national identity and declares the cultural and linguistic heredity of generations an important state concern of the Republic («важной государственной заботой республики») and the duty of every citizen.

On the other hand, extensive application of the expression *language of official usage* in the legislation of many countries relates the concept “official language” rather with the concept “personal right”, than with the concept “duty, obligation”. Provisions of the equality of different languages (and alphabets) are found in many national legislations: “On the territories of local self-government units traditionally inhabited by the representatives of national minorities, their languages and alphabets may be in equal official usage” («може бити у равноправној службеној употреби»), the law of Serbia “On the equal use of language and alphabet”, article 11); “This Law creates the conditions for official use of the languages and alphabets of the national minorities which grant them equal rights with the Croatian language and alphabet” (“Law on the use of languages and alphabets in the Republic of Croatia”, article 1); “Everybody has the right to receive services and public documents from the central institutions of

Kosovo in any official language” («na bilo koji službeni jezik», “Act on language usage”, article 4.2). The number of similar examples can be extended.

A unique phenomenon in the Slavic sociolinguistic terminology is the Polish expression *język pomocniczy* (auxiliary language). According to the Polish language legislation it means the language that has the right to be used along with the country’s official language in the state offices of a specified administrative unit: “Przed organami gminy, obok języka urzędowego, może być używany, jako język pomocniczy, język mniejszości” (“Ustawa o mniejszościach narodowych i etnicznych oraz o języku regionalnym”, article 9). Another distinctive feature of the Polish legislation is the unambiguous differentiation of the notions “the languages of national and ethnic minorities” (“języki mniejszości narodowych i etnicznych”), which roughly corresponds to the Charter’s minority languages¹⁴, on the one hand, and “the regional language” (*język regionalny*)¹⁵, on the other hand. According to the legislation, the only regional language in Poland is Kashubian: „Językiem regionalnym w rozumieniu ustawy jest język kaszubski” (“Ustawa o mniejszościach narodowych i etnicznych oraz o języku regionalnym”, article 19). The status of the Kashubian language, however, is not quite clear. Kashubians are not considered a national minority in Poland and they are not mentioned in the official list of the national and ethnic minorities. In the official documents the speakers of the Kashubian language are collectively called *a community using a regional language* (“społeczność posługująca się językiem regionalnym”, see, for example: «I Raport dla Sekretarza Generalnego Rady Europy z realizacji przez Rzeczpospolitą Polską Europejskiej karty języków regionalnych lub mniejszościowych»). Consequently the question arises whether Kashubian is a separate language or a dialect of Polish. From this perspective the application of

¹⁴ In Polish usage there is also expression *języki mniejszościowe*.

¹⁵ Some researchers express the view that the terms *regional* languages and *minority* languages are used in the national language legislations and internationally as equivalent units: Соколовский С. В., Тишкова В. А. Европейская языковая Хартия и защита языковых прав в России // Европейская языковая хартия и Россия : Исслед. по приклад. и неотлож. этнологии / Под ред. С. В. Соколовского и В. А. Тишкова. — М., 2010. — С. 5.

the term *regional language* to Kashubian is not free of contradictions, because the definition of the regional or minority language given in article 1 of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages excludes the dialects of the country's official language. Thus the application of the expression *regional language* to Kashubian in Polish legislation is a kind of linguo-juridical compromise¹⁶.

It should be emphasized that in the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages the word combination *regional or minority language* is used rather as a descriptive expression than a status term. According to the Explanatory Report to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, this expression appeared as an attempt to give a collective description of the so called lesser used languages, by combining the two designations *regional language* and *minority language* that were used in the European countries' national legislations as separate notions. No national legislation used a language status term having two adjectival components connected by the conjunction *or*.

Paradoxically, Ukraine became the first (and only) country to introduce the expression *regional or minority language* into national legislation. It is used in a much debated and controversial law "On the principles of the state language policy" adopted in 2012 under the pressure of the ruling Party of Regions. However, this term is usually reduced in everyday usage to a clipped version *regional language* (регіональна мова) instead of the full term *regional or minority language* (регіональна мова або мова меншини) as used in the law.

The comparative study of the terms of language status in the Slavic languages demonstrates the lack of both substantial and formal congruence, which is caused primarily by the differences of the language situations in the respective countries and by the degree of importance of the language as an ethnic identity matrix in particular national communities. The discussion of the existing terminological discrepancies is important for proper interpretation of the national

¹⁶ Another example of the specific use of the term *language* instead of *dialect* in the Polish language legislation is the so called *Lemko language* which is generally acknowledged as one of the dialects of Ukrainian.

legislative acts and the international legal instruments of language management. The cases of indiscriminate or uncritical use of the seemingly identical terms having different sociolinguistic implications are quite common in both legal, scientific and media texts. In order to prevent misunderstandings and ambiguities a comprehensive sociolinguistic dictionary has to be published and its popular online version has to be made available for general access.